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WHAT TO DO FOR GREEK¹

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About a year ago, standing in Richmond before the stately monument to Jefferson Davis and the soldiers of the Confederacy, I observed a group of school children copying into their note books the lame English hexameters of the Simonidean inscription set there originally in defiant vindication of a lost cause, but now chiefly expressive of the essential soul of northern and southern, of Greek and American, patriotism. Here as elsewhere the profound human experience inevitably recalled to sensitive spirits its beautiful and definitive Greek expression. "Oblivion," said Lowell, "looks into the face of the Grecian muse only to forget her errand."

"Who will deliver us from those Greeks and Latins?" exclaimed the old French poet. Surely not the world-war, despite the endeavors of our enterprising colleagues of the school of education to exploit that blessed Mesopotamian word "reconstruction" for the suppression of Latin and mathematics and the installation of such practical, scientific, experimental, and excitingly adventurous subjects as social control—no, I have confused my "controls"—I mean muscular control of the voluntary wig-wagging of the ears:

There was a young man who said, "Why
Can't I look in my ear with my eye?
If I set my mind to it
I'm sure I could do it,
You never can tell till you try."

But it takes all kinds of people to make a world, and meanwhile other young men were carrying pocket-copies of Homer and Horace into the trenches, reading Herodotus with fresh zest on the Mesopotamian front, writing home to plan the completion and publication of dissertations that would "settle *hoti's* business and

¹ An address given at the National Classical Conference in Milwaukee, July 3, 1919.

properly base *own*." And to consecrate the memory of some of them who never will come home in the flesh, the century of the new reformed education again remembered Simonides.

When you go home tell them of us and say,
"For your tomorrow they gave their today."

Tell England, you who pass this monument,
We died for her and rest here well content.

Well, what does that prove? as the eminent mathematician said of *Paradise Lost*. I am not yet undertaking to prove anything. I am telling you, slightly elaborated and idealized in the retrospect, some of the reflections excited in my mind by that Simonidean inscription. With a teacher's eagerness to share and impart these great thoughts I turned to the school children and volunteered the information: "The inscription which you are copying is from the Greek." "Is that so?" was the reply. "It's Creek, is it?" They had heard of the Creek Indians, but toward Greek their attitude was that of the mediaeval monks whose sole comment on Greek quotations in Latin manuscripts was: "Graecum est non legitur."

This anticlimax, this comic contrast between the Greek professor's reflections and the children's response, points the paradox of the present situation of Greek. While the nominal study of Greek has been suppressed in the high schools, and the classes are dwindling in the colleges, our universities have developed a scholarship which we never possessed before, and which it would be a pity to starve and let die at the very time when the world needs it most. For in the breakdown and reorganization for practical necessities of the European education it is not altogether fanciful to suppose that it may prove to be the temporary mission of the American university to carry on that torch of Hellenism which Italy, France, England, and Germany had borne in turn. Though the Greek scholars of America are all too few, though they are unorganized and accustomed to dependence on Europe, the achievements of the past twenty years show that with reasonable encouragement they are not altogether inadequately prepared to sustain this rôle. If the maintenance and development of this

promising but as yet precarious school of the new Greek scholarship were only a feather in America's cap, merely a decorative inutility, it might still be urged that America could well afford it. Our expenditure on chewing-gums would pay for all our Greek departments three or four times over. The trustees of our great universities as intelligent and practical idealists appreciate the truth which I have ventured to emphasize by this homely illustration. It will, I believe, be their policy to support the new Greek scholarship of America regardless of the size of the classes.

America is very large and has many universities. The demand for really well-trained Hellenists will for some years exceed the supply, and no young man who feels the vocation, who is conscious of the ability to make of himself a genuine scholar and teacher, need fear that he will miss the scholar's reward of an assured, if somewhat ascetically measured, competence. This is the aspect of the Greek question which first presents itself to one who has taught only graduate students for the past twenty years. But I need not say that it is not the Greek question. Quite apart from the danger that the ambitious superstructure must ultimately collapse if the supports from below are withdrawn, it is the Hellenist's faith that Greek studies differ not merely in degree but in kind from Oriental and other philological and antiquarian pursuits. By virtue of the intrinsic charm and stimulating power of the Greek language and literature, and by reason also of their historic influence on the actual course of European thought, the place and the function of these studies in modern education can never be reduced to that of a narrow specialty cultivated by a few experts occupied solely in training up their successors. They must in some reasonable measure enter into what for lack of a better name we describe as "general culture" and "liberal education." This obviously does not mean the reinstatement of a universal requirement of Greek in colleges and high schools. It does mean keeping the doors of opportunity open; in Lowell's vivid phrase, "giving the horse a chance at the ancient springs before concluding that he will not drink." I am not concerned in these brief limits with educational machinery, but with the spirit in which it is to be worked. The distractions, the necessities, the solicitations of modern knowledge,

are infinite. Every thoughtful classicist is aware that many students have no time for classical studies and many others no aptitude or taste for them. But he also knows that the perpetual, unfair, and unreasonable disparagement of them by newspapers, schools of education, deans, fanatical modernists, pseudo-scientists, and, alas, some real scientists who cannot see that the old issue of science and classics is dead—that all this deters and discourages students who have the time and could soon acquire the taste. In our busy modern world the direct study of Greek must be increasingly left to those whose instinct divines the best and whose aspiration will acquiesce in nothing less. Though the percentage of these may be relatively small, in our huge America they are collectively many. And what the Hellenist asks is that these instincts be not suppressed and these aspirations thwarted by unfair and invidious suggestion. Apart from all questions of machinery he wants in our schools and colleges a temper, a tone, a spirit, an atmosphere, in which the study of the world's longest-lived and most beautiful language and most original and most influential literature can live. So much an intelligent modernist professor of education or scientific man ought to concede even when most irritated by the polemical petulance to which the strain of a perpetual defensive sometimes tempts the classicist in his written or spoken discourse.

For, controversy aside, all reasonable educators would wish every study, every intellectual interest, to have a place in the curriculum fairly proportionate to its real significance for our present life and culture. Greek is merely the most conspicuous example, the type of all the cultural studies whose value and place in the curriculum have fluctuated most widely and which are now threatened with extinction by the so-called practical spirit of the age and the temporary unsettlement of all spiritual values by the Great War. For the Revival of Learning Greek meant not only culture and discipline, but progress, philosophy, and science. Since the Renaissance there may have been times when in the prescribed curricula of English and American colleges Greek claimed an attention disproportionate to its real relative significance. That is ancient history. It is quite certain that now, as a result of the controversies of the past fifty years and the consequent unfriendliness of schools

of education and too many teachers of science, Greek studies are unreasonably depressed in our schools. Discussion will not cease until something like the right proportion is restored. The Greek question will not down. It cannot possibly weary my audiences so much as it does me, who have several times said my say carefully and explicitly in print. I had infinitely rather interpret the Platonic philosophy and write articles on *δέ γε* than deliver apologies for the classics and read lectures on the Greek genius. But that is beside the point. Whether I or another bear the burden and give the offense, the debate will continue till the matter is "settled right," and a reasonable adjustment established. Individual Greek professors may cynically retire into their shells and perfect their theory of the irregular verbs in the confidence that their chairs will last their time. Particular audiences may be bored to extinction with disquisitions on the Hellenism of the Greek genius. Individual modernists may ask why, since Greek is obviously moribund, it is so shamelessly long in dying, and why can't it be decently buried and disposed of. Individual professors of pedagogy may be exasperated to the verge of profanity by our insistence on reviving what they deem a dead issue. It will nevertheless always be revived by somebody and the discussion will go on. It would be revived even if the study of Greek were altogether extinguished in a complete collapse of culture and a new dark age and we had to begin all over again with a new Renaissance. Greek is, in short, too fine and big a thing for the human spirit willingly to let die.

The proof and confirmation of these assertions is the theme of the typical plea for Greek which was delivered by Muretus in his inaugural lecture on Plato at Rome in 1573 and will be delivered by some New Zealand or Fiji Island professor in 2573. Perfunctorily repeated in conventional rhetoric and unconvincing tones this plea is a weariness to the flesh. Renewed by inmost conviction and genuine knowledge it will interest and almost convince a modern audience. In the opinion of the judicious we have had the best of the argument in the past ten years. The check to a practical reaction in our favor is the lingering doubt whether in the press of more imperious needs the modern student has time for Greek. I can only indicate two of the answers to the difficulty

which I expect to elaborate elsewhere. One of these is a debater's point and the other a more substantive consideration. The obvious and conclusive debater's point is that the uselessness of Greek can be urged only in favor of a curriculum that includes no studies equally useless in the lower sense of the word utility. A rigid curriculum in physical and technical science may consistently exclude Greek on this ground. No curriculum that admits the older literatures of England, France, or Italy or any serious and considerable study of literature, philosophy, or history can.

The substantive point is the neglected consideration of the value of even a little Greek. Here I can only outline reasons which I hope to work out in a monograph. To waive the considerations on the value of a little knowledge, which are common to all studies—a little Greek imperfectly remembered may be of practical use in several specific ways. If properly taught it may make Homer a possession for life, and vivify and make real the enormous and growing modern literature of interpretation and criticism of Greek things. It gives some sort of a key—the ability to use a dictionary at least—to the immense and ever-increasing technical and scientific vocabulary derived directly from the Greek. I developed this topic before an audience of eminent physicians last winter and had no difficulty in convincing them—or rather their own experience convinced them. There are, as I remember, thirteen consecutive double-columned pages in the *Century Dictionary*, every word of which is Greek. A day rarely passes in which my reading does not present me with a new technical term that I understand from the Greek. And do not answer me that I am a specialist. My argument is that the possessor of even a little Greek is in a better position to look up and understand the meaning of such a word than he who knows none. Third and lastly, even a little Greek is some sort of key to the longest-lived continually spoken and written great language on earth, and one whose influence in Eastern Europe and the United States is on the increase. The shop signs in Khartoum are Greek. On the wharf at San Francisco I understood a proclamation to the Greek immigrants by means of a word which I had never seen elsewhere except in Homer. And do not tell me that this little Greek is forgotten and that mental discipline is a myth.

For I have read in Professor Calparède's *Experimental Pedagogy* that the pedagogical psychology which you have forgotten will still do you good, and I have learned from Professor Thorndike that the manipulation of educational statistics trains the mind in quantitative methods generally, and I have been taught by a professor of vocational education that a high-school course in typewriting, even though it is never used in after-life, remains a valuable discipline in accuracy.

But conceding all this, you ask what is to be done. I have no panacea, and do not believe in the discovery of royal roads to culture and education. Pestalozzi was convinced that our present studies do not require one-tenth of the time or trouble we now give to them. And sentimentalists, charlatans, rhetoricians, and denunciatory reformers unscrupulously repeat similar exaggerations. The *Education of Henry Adams* avers that he could learn by rational methods more Latin and Greek in a few weeks than the Latin school and college taught in many years. There is bad teaching of Greek, as of all other subjects. By all means let us teach it better, more effectively, more spiritedly. I have been trying to do so for thirty years. The most popular type of article in educational journals is "How I Taught Beginners' Latin or Xenophon's *Anabasis* Better Than It Was Ever Taught Before." But I have no time to tell you how much better than anybody else I am now teaching Homer and Plato in the University of Chicago's summer quarter. No matter how well we taught, the second most popular type of educational article would be the denunciation of the dry-as-dust gerund-grinder who never gave the spirit of the classics but only drilled on the verbs in $-\mu$. It is an established convention and an irresistible theme of rhetorical variations. Seneca nearly two thousand years ago anticipated Mr. H. G. Wells and a certain eloquent Ohio superintendent of schools in the complaint that we have professors of everything except of "life." And to skip intervening examples, Mr. Winston Churchill, after denouncing the teachers who made him hate Vergil and the Greek classics, tells how during an excursion of the Bureau of University Travel "I saw framed through a port-hole rose-red Seriphus set in a living blue that paled the sapphire. . . . In that port-hole glimpse a Themis-

toles was revealed, a Socrates, a Homer, a Phidias, an Aeschylus, and a Pericles—I saw the Roman Empire.” No reform of our teaching will enable us to compete with so cheap and expeditious a crystal-gazing apocalypse as that. And such specific recommendations in practical pedagogy as experience suggests to me I must reserve for other occasions and ampler space.

Apart from improved teaching, the only practical thing to be done for Greek is the creation (in the high school and college) of the atmosphere of which I spoke—an atmosphere in which Greek studies can live. That rests not with the teachers of Greek, but mainly with the teachers of Latin and English. They can do it if they choose. And it is surely for their interest in both the higher and lower sense of the word that they should choose. It is superfluous to remind trained Latinists of the interdependence of Greek and Latin studies and of the relation of every phase of Roman life and literature to some Greek source of suggestion and inspiration. They know this, and when they leave the university they intend to act on it. But in the practical routine of teaching they sometimes succumb too easily to the pressure of a hostile environment, and allow their natures to be subdued by the material in which they are compelled to work. You are teaching Vergil. Your superintendent has written a book. Most of my pedagogical enemies have written books which I have read, and this particular superintendent says—I quote verbatim: “A teacher of Latin read to his pupils the *Houseboat on the Styx* in connection with the reading of the Aeneid. It was good fun for them all and never was Vergil more highly honored than in the assiduous study which these young people gave to his lines. They were eager to complete the study of the lesson in order to have more time for the *Houseboat*.”

This somehow irresistibly recalled the plowmen on Achilles’ shield who received a beaker of wine at the end of each furrow and then turned back eager to arrive at the end of the furrow. Do I need to explain why I hope that you will not follow the line of least resistance and the pedagogical methods approved by this official expert? Granted that a few selections from the *Houseboat on the Styx* might, in default of anything better, enliven a class in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* or Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead*, is it not

obvious that this trivial travesty is fatal to the mood and spiritual temper of a classroom that is to appreciate the serene, pathetic, and elegant poetry of the mage Vergil? But that is by the way. The main consideration is that the time to be spared from construing is limited, and instead of wasting it on the *Houseboat on the Styx* you might use it to read and explain to the class typical selections that would illustrate how Vergil summarizes and distils all the culture of the Greek centuries that preceded him and transmits it to the mediaeval and English centuries that were to follow him. If you do this pedantically and in excess and in slavish imitation of university methods, you will confuse and bewilder your students and waste time that is needed for the main business of learning Latin. But if you do it temperately and with discretion, though some of the class may stare stupidly and wonder what you would be at, you will in the end have your reward. Continued faithfully, a little at a time through the year, such teaching will kindle the divine fire of literary appreciation in the minds of some of the class at least, it will give them some dim apprehension of the unity of European literature and of the human spirit—and, what is more to our present point, it will probably induce two or three of them to elect beginning Greek in the Freshman year of college. In other words, instead of trying to make Latin interesting by mere tricks and entertainments that divert the mind from the real values that make it worth while to study Latin at all, we should seek interest—of course after the direct understanding and enjoyment of the text—in the appreciation of Latin as the unifier of all cultural history and the mediator between Hellenism and the modern world. This has an ambitious sound, but I assume a little common sense in the application.

At any rate, it is for the larger interest of teachers of Latin and teachers of English to teach in this way with some consciousness of the relation of their material to the Greek tradition, not merely in order to do something for Greek but in order that they may save themselves. It is possible that, whatever happens to Greek, the mechanical teaching of Latin and English will last your time, and you will continue to draw your salaries. But I assume that you take a more generous and liberal view of educational policies than

that. And from this higher, broader point of view it is quite certain that the temper of jealous obscurantism which exults in the prospect of the extermination of the last survivals of Greek from the high school will in a few years destroy any teaching of Latin and English literature in which a truly refined and cultivated spirit could take refuge. The Bolshevists of modernism propose to destroy all the vested interests of the humanistic tradition, all the capitalization of our historic culture by the repudiation of our debt to the past, the demonetization of all poetic gold that has stood the test of time, and to flood the schools with the fiat paper currency of the journalistic literature of the hour and the textbooks of their pseudo-sciences. Were I to publish this address, the austere Hellenists of the *New Republic* would perhaps again deplore the failure of Greek σωφροσύνη and Horatian urbanity in an unworthy spokesman of academic culture. But whatever may be thought of the elegance of its perhaps too curious elaboration, the logic of this little allegory runs exactly parallel to the facts. There is no phase or phrase of the imagery which I could not justify by quotations from the books of men prominent in the official world of education today. Greek is only a symbol, a pretext, and the first point of attack. What they desire is the suppression of all intellectual distinctions in every sense of the word "distinction." They would abolish all studies that they do not themselves understand or appreciate—a large order. They do not wish anything taught in their schools that would spoil the student's taste for their textbooks, or teach him to challenge their logic. They call this debasing of the intellectual and educational currency giving the public what it wants and meeting the pupil on his own level. But what they really propose is to give the public what *they want* the public *to want* and to meet the pupil on the level of the undisciplined and lower selves of the inferior half of the class. Again I shall be rebuked for intemperate exaggeration. But I am aware of the exceptions. There are of course many refined and cultivated men who from carelessness or prejudice make common cause with the assailants of all humanistic culture.

There are still more who in the presence of a critical audience will hedge and qualify and try to express themselves with the apparent

sweet reasonableness of President Eliot. But what do they say when they go before a state legislature, or a meeting of the rustic teachers' association, or in the classrooms of the school of education? Some of you know by bitter experience. And I have read and analyzed too many of their books to be deceived in their prevailing temper and purpose.

"The principal of a great western high school," writes a notorious Bolshevistic popularizer in a book on the new education, "which housed nearly two thousand children pointed to one room in which a tiny class bent over their books. 'That is probably the last class in Greek that we shall ever have in the school,' he said. 'They are sophomores. Only two freshmen elected Greek this fall and we decided not to form the class.'" What do you suppose is that writer's and that principal's real opinion about Vergil, and the "waning classic" Dante, and Milton, and the relative merits of Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw, and "such literary sawdust" as Burke's "Speech on Conciliation," "The Ancient Mariner," and "Lycidas," and for that matter about Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, or Lowell? But I don't need to suppose, for I have the evidence in print and only lack of space prevents me from submitting it to you.

There is nothing that we Greek teachers can do for Greek except guard the fire within, teach as well as we can, and amuse our leisure by "gunning for" pseudo-scientists. The woods are full of them, and the entire year is open season. If we can once get into the minds of our colleagues of the physical sciences our seriously meant distinction between science and pseudo-science, we may prepare the way for an alliance that may preserve not merely Greek, which is incidental, but the disciplines and cultures of which Greek is now only a symbol. But until our scientific colleagues have laid aside the prejudices of now-obsolete controversies, the main line of defense will be held by the teachers of Latin and English. There are enough of you to resist the encroachments of the spirit that has destroyed Greek and is now preparing to debase and vulgarize and enfeeble you. You can if you choose influence the plastic minds of the children committed to your care. You can create and maintain in your schools an atmosphere that will preserve your studies and

may reinstate Greek. You need not unless you choose in spirit serve and obsequiously obey the dictators

Who con their ritual of routine,
With minds to one dead likeness blent,
And never even in dreams have seen
The things that are more excellent.

But to achieve this freedom and this influence you must yourselves be and embody all which you would impart. And you must not be discouraged by the unfriendliness of your environment or the recalcitrance of your material. Never was there a greater falsity than the current commonplace that it is impossible to teach literature. Creative literary genius is of course incommunicable. But the sense for literature in its power to refine and ennoble feeling, to criticize and transfigure life and dignify mortal suffering and frailty, can be gradually but surely imparted by anybody who has rightly learned to appreciate it himself. You cannot do this all at once and for everybody, but you can in the long run and for enough to be richly worth while. It is a pernicious half-truth that inculcates the necessity of meeting the student on his own level. In practice it means meeting him on the lowest common level of the relaxed self of both teacher and pupil. If you have a higher self and a higher level to exhibit day by day in the classroom, there is something in the soul of the pupil that will in the end respond despite the new sophists who, like the old, proclaim that the sunlight only dazzles the practical vision and that it is better to hug your chains contentedly amid the shadows of excellence down in the cave of Philistinism. To all such let your answer be:

And still doth life with starry towers
Lure to the bright divine ascent;
Be yours the things ye would, be ours
The things that are more excellent.